



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

Region 50
(St. Clair County)



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Introduction

In 2021, the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Funding issued a report with findings that highlighted the inequities in ECEC funding in Illinois and the need to create a better statewide infrastructure to support ECEC professionals, expand services and programs for families and caregivers, and increase enrollment in ECEC programs. The report focused on the importance of addressing racial inequities and the need to include local voices in the conversation funders and decisionmakers were having about ECEC.

The experiences and knowledge families, caregivers, and Early Childhood professionals gain while navigating the complexities of the State's ECEC system is valuable, and understanding their lived experience in the local context is vital for decisionmakers to ensure communities have access to the programs, services, and supports they need. To this end, Birth to Five Illinois was created to harness family and caregiver voices in ECEC and serve as a bridge between the communities and policymakers so family, caregiver, and professional experiences can guide the decisions made to expand or enhance services across the State.

Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments

Between August 2022 and May 2023, Regional Teams throughout the State met with their local Action Council and Family Council to talk about Early Childhood data and hear about their experiences with ECEC programs and services. They also conducted focus groups, interviews, held community listening sessions, and conducted surveys to gather additional feedback from caregivers, ECEC professionals, and priority populations in their Region. A community report, the Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment, was completed in June 2023. However, recognizing that not all community members had a chance to provide their feedback on data or share their experiences in the original Regional Needs Assessment, additional feedback was collected through community events and meetings, and this Addendum was created to complement the existing report. The new information provided by community members, agencies, organizations, and other community stakeholders is listed below.

Regional Community Landscape

Much of the community feedback on this section was centered on the Scott Air Force Base, located in St. Clair County, housing and food needs for families, and an upcoming Community Needs Assessment report from local health departments and hospitals.

Scott Air Force Base is a location of choice for families who have children with medical needs due to its proximity to two major children's medical hospitals in St. Louis. There is a consistent arrival and departure of families, leaving community members to wonder how the number of families is captured and reported and then considered as part of the child care needs in the Region. Additionally, concerns were raised by community members about the lower rate of local property

taxes required from disabled veterans. It is estimated that St. Clair County has lost \$4.5 million due to tax exemptions; the city of Mascoutah has lost more than \$12 million since 2015, and District #90 in O'Fallon lost \$2.5 in 2022 due to property tax exemptions. The lower amount of taxes collected has resulted in school districts receiving less funding, leading to a shift in the services they are able to provide. While a new state program aimed at filling the funding gaps left by property tax collection will provide some relief, it will not make up for the full revenue school districts have already lost.

Community members also discussed how the lack of safe, affordable housing and nutritional food options has impacted families and communities. Some families live in housing that have lead in the paint, pipes, or items in their home; however, they are reluctant to advocate for better conditions or report their landlord for violations because they fear eviction as retaliation. Additionally, many families do not have access to fresh food due to a lack of grocery stores in their community. Some also reported issues with utilizing programs such as Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) because items that should be marked eligible are not, leaving them to search for substitute items that qualify.

A new, unreleased Community Health Needs Assessment was provided during our dissemination meetings. Below are a few highlights from the forthcoming report:

- Data shows that our total population has decreased roughly by 5,000 since 2020.
- The population for adolescents under 18 has slightly decreased, while the population of persons 65 and older has increased slightly.
- St. Clair County has more than double the state and national population of veterans and military personnel.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Many families enrolled in child care centers in St. Clair county are actually from surrounding counties. Parents traveling to St. Clair or to St. Louis for work utilize programs there instead of enrolling their children in programs closer to their home. This is important to note because families feel they are not only competing with local families for slots but families in the entire metropolitan area for child care slots. The added competition for child care has resulted in waitlists.

There were also concerns shared by providers that the process of becoming licensed is unrealistic for programs. Some said they were unable to pay for space for long periods of time without the income while waiting to become licensed due to the outgoing cost of renting or leasing and monthly expenditures. Additionally, more programs reported they are no longer accepting state funding due to the amount of paperwork, the long waitlists, and a lack of staff that does not enable them to do their job effectively.

Another concern expressed by a community member was that children who have disabilities or delays have very few options for child care and services.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Early Childhood Directors reported that they have been covering classrooms to keep them open due to a shortage of staff, leaving them to complete their own responsibilities once the classroom or program closes for the day. Some child care owners said they are close to closing their programs completely due to the lack of staffing and the requirements.

Some license-exempt staff expressed frustration that they are still unable to access educational or pay supplement scholarships, even though they are working in the same field as those in licensed centers and homes and meeting the necessary legal requirements to remain open.

Additional Community Feedback

Community agencies and organizations reported that staying in contact with families using services is a challenge. Some families use pre-paid wireless services that are purchased for them by a supporting service or have minutes provided to their phone plan monthly. It was noted that cell phones issued to families with limited access to economic resources only have 60 minutes allotted per month. Unfortunately, the cell phones turn off once they reach the end of the minutes, leaving families, agencies, and organizations disconnected. Additionally, some families frequently move due to a lack of safe, affordable housing, making it difficult to keep them connected to services and supports.

It was also noted that while some transportation supports are available, they are limited. To utilize the Flier service, provided by the St. Clair Transportation Department, people must make an appointment 72 hours in advance. Unfortunately, some people need an earlier appointment due to sudden onset illness so they must find alternate transportation. Using the bus system is not easy either, and some rely on rideshare services such as Uber, which is limited in most areas and costs quite a bit more, with drivers frequently cancelling the pickup. Even those who own cars note the cost of owning, maintaining, and insuring them has become a burden.

Because of the lack of affordable transportation options, coupled with living in areas that are largely unwalkable, people may miss important appointments or be forced to wait a long time at locations while they wait for pickup and drop-off.

Additional Regional Recommendations

New recommendations were given by community members during the dissemination of our original report.

- Implement a child care tax credit for Early Childhood professionals and child care center/home owners for professional development and other job-related expenses.
- Create grants to support families to pay for child care.
- Create capital grants for programs to purchase equipment or building improvement.
- Cultivate new and stronger partnerships between business owners and Early Childhood programs in which businesses fund or subsidize slots for their employees.
- Cultivate new and stronger partnerships between the St. Clair Health Department and rideshare businesses such as Uber and Lyft to provide transportation subsidized by the agency to and from medical appointments.

- Create Patient Navigators for the Health Department to help people connect more easily to services.

Next Steps

As Regional Teams continue their conversations with caregivers, ECEC professionals, and community stakeholders, their stories and experiences with ECEC programs and services will be recorded and shared with state and local agencies, legislators, funders, and decisionmakers. We hope our work will contribute to reimagining an Early Childhood system that is more equitable for all families and support the incredible work ECEC professionals do every day.